

KANT ON THE SYNTHETIC A PRIORI

Text source:

*Prolegomena to Any Future
Metaphysics*, preamble sections 1 and 2

HOW SHOULD WE DEFINE THE FIELD OF METAPHYSICS?

“If it first becomes desirable to organize any knowledge as science, it will be necessary first to determine accurately those peculiar features which no other science has in common with it, constituting its peculiarity; otherwise the boundaries of all sciences become confused, and none of them can be treated thoroughly according to its nature.”

(Kant, *Prolegomena*, preamble section 1 para 1)

KANT'S ANSWER:

*METAPHYSICS IS THE SCIENCE OF
SYNTHETIC A PRIORI JUDGMENTS*

“The conclusion drawn in this section then is that metaphysics is properly concerned with synthetical propositions a priori, and these alone constitute its end ... the generation of a priori knowledge by intuition as well as by concepts, in fine, of **synthetical propositions a priori, especially in philosophical knowledge, constitutes the essential subject of metaphysics.**”

(Kant, *Prolegomena*, preamble section 2 para. 17)

‘A PRIORI’ VS. ‘A POSTERIORI’ JUDGMENTS

- **A POSTERIORI judgments:**

- Judgments grounded in (and justifiable in terms of) experience.

- **A PRIORI judgments:**

- Judgments grounded in (and justifiable in terms of) reason, independent of experience.

- The basic idea: A PRIORI judgments are those judgments we can make simply by *reflecting on or thinking through our concepts*, without checking via experience on the way the world in fact is.
 - Since a priori judgments can be determined in advance of experience, without checking on the way the world in fact is, they must be *necessary* judgments, not *contingent* judgments.
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KANT: METAPHYSICS CONCERNS A PRIORI JUDGMENTS

“First as concerns the sources of metaphysical knowledge, its very concept implies that they cannot be empirical. Its principles (including not only its maxims but its basic notions) must never be derived from experience. It must not be physical but metaphysical knowledge, namely, knowledge lying beyond experience. It can therefore have for its basis neither external experience, which is the source of physics proper, nor internal, which is the basis of empirical psychology. **It is therefore a *priori* knowledge. ... The peculiarity of its sources demands that metaphysical knowledge must consist in nothing but a *priori* judgments.**”

(Kant, *Prolegomena*, preamble section 1 para. 3, section 2 para. 1)

‘ANALYTIC’ VS. ‘SYNTHETIC’ JUDGMENTS

- “There is a distinction in judgments, as to their content, according to which they are either merely **explicative**, adding nothing to the content of knowledge, or **expansive**, increasing the given knowledge. The former may be called **analytical**, the latter **synthetical** judgments.”

(Kant, *Prolegomena*, preamble section 2 para 1)

‘ANALYTIC’ AND SYNTHETIC’ JUDGMENTS

(Continued)

- ANALYTIC JUDGMENTS merely unpack the content of a concept, explicating what it already contains.
 - E.g. All sisters are women.
 - E.g. All bachelors are unmarried.

 - SYNTHETIC JUDGMENTS go beyond unpacking what is already contained in the concept. They add new information.
 - E.g. Bachelors pay proportionally more taxes than married men.
 - E.g. Nearly all the big name historical philosophers are bachelors.
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**Obviously, analytic judgments, being merely
‘explicative’, are not informative about the actual
world**

Locke calls them ‘trifling’ judgments:

“What is this more than trifling with words?”

“What is this more than trifling with words? It is but like a monkey shifting his oyster from one hand to the other; and had he but words, might, no doubt, have said, “*Oyster in right hand is subject, and oyster in left hand is predicate*”: and so might have made a self-evident proposition of oyster, i.e. “*oyster is oyster*”; and yet, with all this, not have been one whit the wiser or more knowing: And that way of handling the matter would much at one have satisfied the monkey's hunger, or a man's understanding, and they would have improved in knowledge and bulk together.”

(Locke, ECHU 4.8.3)

THE CHALLENGE TO VINDICATING METAPHYSICS AS A GENUINE SCIENCE:

- So Kant thinks that metaphysics (if it genuinely exists) must concerns judgments that are *simultaneously* **A PRIORI** and **SYNTHETIC**.

 - But the big question is: *How can any such judgments be justified?*
 - How can *a priori* thought go beyond merely explicative *analytic* judgments??
 - Don't we need *a posteriori* thought if we are ever to have a genuinely expansive *synthetic* judgments??
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For Hume, all a priori judgments are analytic, and all synthetic judgments are a posteriori: the synthetic a priori is a nonsense.

“When we run over our libraries, persuaded of these principles, what havoc must we make? If we take in our hand any volume; of divinity or school metaphysics, for instance; let us ask, ***Does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number*** [which for Hume is *analytic* and a *priori*]? **No.** ***Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence*** [which for Hume is *synthetic* and a *posteriori*]? **No. Commit it then to the flames; for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion.**”

(Hume, ECHU section 12 para. 34)

THE CHALLENGE: Can Kant stop Hume's bonfire and rescue a form of legitimate metaphysics, i.e. a legitimate form of synthetic a priori judgment?

To be continued...
